



# ELSAH HISTORY

Number 32

Summer 1980

## A ROCK WALL TOUR

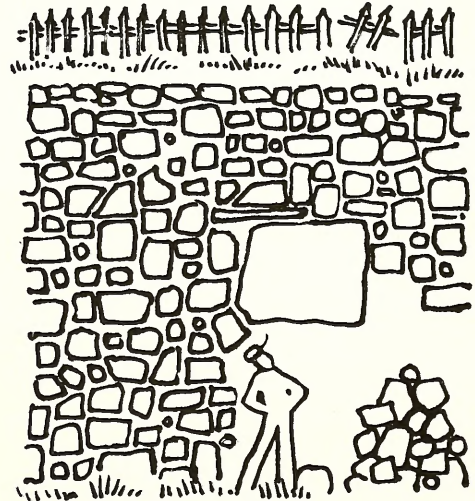
by Blanche C. Darnell

No matter how one approaches Elsay, the observant viewer soon sees that old Elsay stand-by, the rock wall. From the Great River Road (Elsah's newest entrance), we are greeted by Riverview's multi-faceted rock wall built by Ed Rhoads around the late '40s. In addition to usual rocks, he used chunks of glass, pieces of iron, and any exotic boulders he came across.

Much more typical are the older and more sedate retaining walls holding up much of LaSalle Street, mainly visible from the alley which runs from Elm to Maple Street through the center of Elsay. This wall begins in the rear yard of Riverview, shows up in the Village Inn terrace (now the private courtyard of the Bradleys), then again between the Onetto-Brock-Belote house and The Elsay Landing, and between The Landing and Keller's old store (now apartments). This latter section is barely visible from the Landing parking lot in back. Again we see it (from the alley) as the west wall of Miss Lucy McDow's perpetual vegetable and flower garden. The large three foot wide dike wall on the south of her garden must have been built about this same time.

For the most part, these were mortared, and have been maintained through the years with tuck-pointing. Some are bulging outward now after all these years but still hold well. The smaller lateral boundaries were sometimes mortared, sometimes simply laid as dry wall. Recently the Belotes had to rebuild their northern boundary and this was done in the time-honored dry-wall tradition, clearing a firm base, using gravel against frost heaving when possible, laying the larger base rocks slanting back in, so the wall itself will lean into the side of the bank and not topple later on. Dry walls are feasible for walls up to about four feet high for this reason. There are a number of these lower dry walls around the village, some retaining banks, some there for dikes to keep out sudden cloudburst water run-off, some as free standing boundaries.

The solid and very imposing Gatehouse rock wall serves all three purposes. It appears to have been built by an early mason in Elsay, Hiram Kyser, about 1893 or '94. Another precise and handsome wall was the retaining wall built in more recent times behind the Christian Science church (now mostly demolished because of the new Sunday School addition this year but visible out front), along with the rock sidewalk laid at the same time. This work was done by Walter Cresswell, with Harry Barnal's help. Another wall done by them can be seen up-valley where Harry Barnal's house stood. In that wall is a red granite dressed stone engraved with his name and the year the wall was built. Another Cresswell wall is the one around Fountain Square Park.



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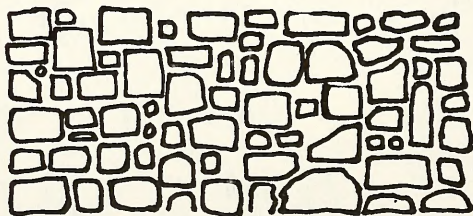
Mr. Robert Lowder, one of Harry Barnal's nephews, explained the presence of the red and pink granite rocks to be seen here and there in Elsah, including the large memorial stone in Fountain Square Park. Elsah quarried stone was used for commercial purposes, paint and putty ingredients, and the red granite stones were brought in and used as the grindstones. The Elsah rock processed in the big mill, used for paints, was ground fine as flour, and that in the putty mill above, where the lime was cut, was used as a putty base. Old-timers in these parts would take this finely ground powder, add linseed oil to the right consistency, and white or red lead to harden it, and this was the putty used in most of the old windows in Elsah. When the red granite stones were worn down they were discarded, and have gradually found their way all over the village, some for instance bordering a flower bed in the McNair-Minarick garden across from the park.

It is difficult to find masons nowadays who can build walls like Hiram Kyser or Walter Cresswell or Harry Barnal did, but one very recent example of excellent dry wall building may be glimpsed behind the Parsonage-Pitchford house. It was built by Michael Pitchford from quarried Grafton stones, cut and fitted with precision to last (almost) forever.

But pictures from the past show us that once a wall is built, this does not necessarily mean it will stay there forever just that way. The series of walls in front of the house known as the Apocrypha show several walls, none of them like the present one, recently rebuilt. Needs change and ideas change, and masons are few and far between, but some form of stone wall will likely always be in Elsah.

The mortared walls will need tuck-pointing, the dry walls will need some renewing over the years, and various owners come along who enjoy the task of rebuilding theirs when needed. The bluffs are always rolling down more rocks to renew the supply. Whether to hold the banks or keep out waters, whether free standing like the one east of the parking lot at Maple and LaSalle or solidly mortared into the hill like the lovely one across from The Landing, all of them were and are an integral part of the 19th (and 20th) century of the Village of Elsah.

Enjoy them as you stroll.



## MAPLE LEAF COTTAGES

by Blanche C. Darnell

Where in Elsah can someone from Mill Valley or Cape Cod meet someone from Upper Saddle River or Keokuk? Or, for that matter, someone from Geneva, Switzerland, Tokyo, Japan, Madras, India, or Rio de Janeiro, Brazil? At the Maple Leaf Cottages on LaSalle Street, of course. A rapid scan of the guest books from these three cottages shows not only those places people have come from, but also Sweden, Germany, Venezuela, Thailand, Indonesia, England, Canada, Mexico, and even Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C. (one J.W. Dean III), and Bowling Green, Ohio (one Glenn Felch). You never can tell where they may be from next.

But Alma and Paul Barnes will know. They have been welcoming this country's friend and stranger, and the world's, since the early 1950's when they realized there was a need for a place for Principia parents and friends to stay when visiting the campus, when the Village Inn (now the Bradley residence) was full.

They began by fixing up the storage building which had been rebuilt on the same foundation as the Lohr's summer kitchen. (A fire had destroyed the original house and outbuildings on that property. One can still see the charred beams below... if one is doing plumbing or the like.) A bathroom was built in and the interior and exterior nicely finished, the side door moved to the front and painted a welcoming blue, and "A" Cottage was opened. It proved so popular and booked up, especially after the Village Inn closed, that Paul and his grandfather, William R. Barnes, built B Cottage early in 1960. Later, C Cottage was added, opening Feb. 10, 1973. Since that time the three cottages have scarcely been empty, and for years were booked three and four years in advance during graduation week and other busy campus times. They are already reserved for next June's graduation.





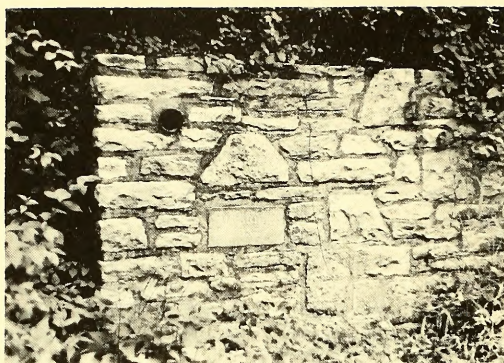
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Elsah's newest stone wall under construction during the spring of 1980. James Belote, fresh from a sabbatical, supervises a dedicated construction crew consisting of Edith Belote, Blanche Darnell and Nancy Belote. The wall now separates the Belote yard from the parking lot of The Elsay Landing restaurant. In the background the Keller barn and the Schneider-Lazenby house can be seen.

# AN ELSAH ALBUM

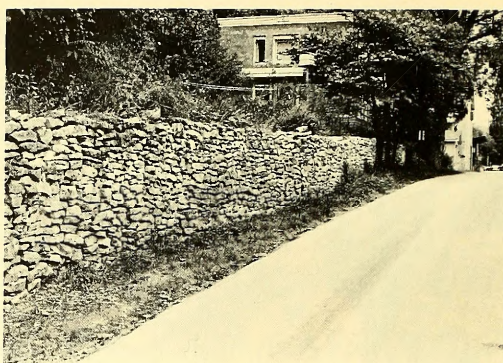
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A portion of the wall at the Harry Barnal house site. It bears the date 1935.



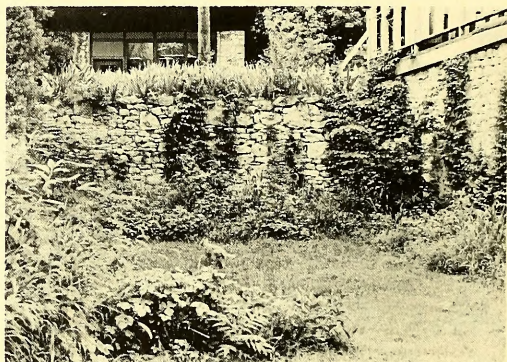
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The long retaining wall at the Bible House.



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The west wall of Miss Lucy McDow's garden.



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The retaining wall on the Belote side of La Salle Street. The Maybeck Gallery is in the background.



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James Belote carefully selecting stones for his new wall.



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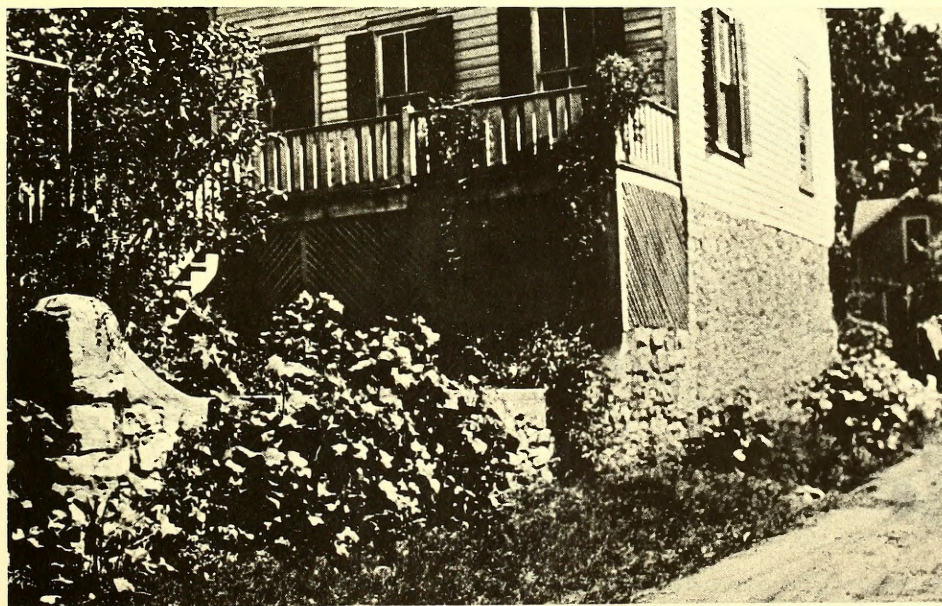
A detail of the dry wall at the Parsonage-Pitchford house.





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(Top) The wall currently separating the James Green garden from La Salle Street.  
(Bottom) The Apocrypha (the James Green house) showing the stone wall that used to enclose the garden area.

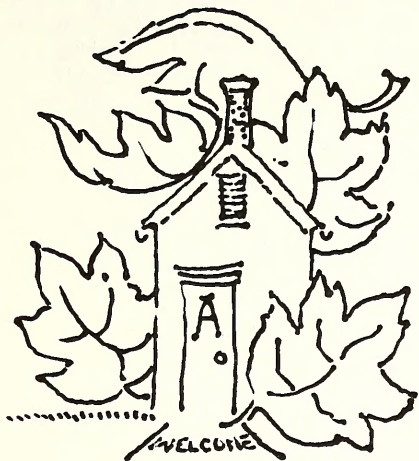


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A detail of the front porch of the Reed-Cresswell house. This stonework was put in by Walter J. Cresswell in 1931.



This writer first heard about Maple Leaf Cottages six years ago out in Novato, California, from one who had come often to Elsay and always stayed at the cottages when he could. "Mr. Barnes keeps them in tiptop shape," he said, "and Mrs. Barnes keeps them in apple-pie order. Absolutely, a home away from home!"

That tiptop shape included a complete renovation of A Cottage just two years ago and B Cottage is on Paul's calendar for an upgrading soon. He works on the cottages when Alma is on one of her trips abroad, sometimes to visit the very folks who first made the cottages their home here.

That feeling of home is so strong that many who have come send cards and letters years later, keeping in touch with the Barnes, and all wanting to come back again for a visit. One woman from Indiana tries to come for a week each year just to stroll through Elsay and soak up its calm and quiet, while staying in homelike quarters.

Whether guests dress up for outings (Alma recalls one gorgeous turquoise pleated sari worn by the lady from Bangkok) or simply relax in the air-conditioned havens from the July noon, the cottages are there to welcome, nestled under towering maples and tulip poplars, reached by flower lined walks, past birds feeding in the lilac bushes or butterflies on the phlox.

Reservations are made in advance by phone or mail. All are welcome, but no smoking or alcohol are permitted. Cleanliness, order, beauty, and neighbors from Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Caracas, or even Burbank... what more could one ask?

My Novato friend told me! "Try to go in the fall. Alma always has a bowl of fresh apples in the room." ... No wonder the world comes to Elsay.



## PERCIVAL ROBERTSON

by Paul O. Williams

With the passing of Percival Robertson this summer, Elsay has lost a resident of longer experience with the village than most of the native born residents.

Born in New Haven, Connecticut, Professor Robertson did his undergraduate work at Yale University, receiving his PhD there in 1915. In the fall of that year he joined the faculty of Principia, then in St. Louis at its campus at Page and Belt.

He also first visited Elsay in that year, both as a geologist and as one interested in the Elsay paintings of Frederick Oakes Sylvester, who had died in St. Louis earlier that year. Carrying a copy of Sylvester's book, The Great River, Percival Robertson tried to locate the sites from which the paintings were made, finally concluding that while such sites were in general recognizable, Sylvester had made modifications to suit his sense of artistic design.

Subsequent study led "Dr. Robbie," as he was known by his students, to his MS and PhD, earned in study done at Washington University, the University of Colorado, and the University of Chicago. His disciplines included mining engineering, chemistry, and geology.

He was also the first Principia faculty member to teach a class in Elsay, long before the college even considered moving its campus to the bluffs east of the village. Professor Robertson taught a surveying class in Elsay, in which his students used areas which would eventually become college campus as field areas for mapping. The students roomed in the Worthey House on LaSalle Street, today the home of Paula and Ned Bradley.



Married in 1914 to Gladys Mae Smith, Professor Robertson and his family moved to Elsah when the college began its operations there in 1935. The Robertsons settled in a secluded home in a hollow near the bluffs, close to the back road from the village to the campus. Their two sons, Graeme and Forbes, reached maturity in Elsah. Subsequently Forbes was to return as a Professor of Geology after his father's retirement from that post, only recently himself retiring to Florida.

While he began his forty years as a member of the Principia faculty as a mathematics teacher, Dr. Robbie pioneered the building of the natural science department and chaired the departments of chemistry and geology. His later students knew him as a geologist and instructor in the history of science, in which capacity he not only introduced undergraduate liberal arts students to scientific modes of thought, and great scientific thinkers of the past, but gave instruction in analytical reading of a very high order.

Dr. Robertson was well known in his field, contributing a number of scientific papers and articles to learned societies. He belonged to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Chemical Society, the St. Louis Academy of Science, the Missouri Academy of Science, and the Illinois Academy of Science, which he served as president. He also served as a member of the Illinois State Museum Board.

Retiring from Principia College in 1955, Professor Robertson was named a Professor Emeritus and awarded a Doctor of Laws degree by the college. At this time, he and his wife moved into the village, settling in the Bible House on LaSalle Street, currently the home of David and Jane Pfeifer and their children.

This home dates from the early years of Elsah, and in its original appearance was not unlike that of the Roberta Simpson house (the Belote home) up the street. Miss Mary Hughes gave the house its name, the Bible House, and drastically changed its form before it was acquired by the Robertsons, who changed it further.

After his retirement, Dr. Robbie taught at Duke University and later at Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. In recent years he resided year round in Elsah.

Mrs. Robertson passed on in 1964, and subsequently Dr. Robbie married Helen Henley, a journalist. The Robertsons remained very active in local civic, educational, and church work until very recently when, after the passing of his second wife, Dr. Robbie moved to Florida.

Among his many projects, Dr. Robbie wrote a pamphlet for Historic Elsah Foundation in 1974, entitled THE GREAT RIVER, MASTER SCULPTOR. This monograph is typical of Dr. Robertson's combination of the practical, scientific, and philosophical, containing not only an appreciation of the area,

but basic geological information about it, as well as a guide to the formations to be seen in the bluff but-crops along the River Road from Alton to Pere Marquette State Park, together with a series of illustrations. An appendix of information about local fossils is also included.

Those who first became acquainted with Dr. Robbie near the end of his long career as an academician at Principia College found him even then enthusiastic about young people, thoughtful, and insightful. One thing this vivid individual never tired of was thinking, and he could always be counted on to look upon anything within his purview with clarity and originality, never, it seemed, merely accepting a common view of anything without probing further and contributing his active thought to the subject.

His memory was extensive and his inquiries untiring. He was tenacious in pursuit of any idea. His interest in Elsah history came at a time when few were so concerned, and as a geologist he carried that history back to dimensions which few of us can adequately conceive of. Certainly he himself is a significant part of the history of the village.

## NOTES

The house tour on Saturday, October 11, will be for sustaining members only. Tickets for sustaining members should be enclosed in this copy of the newsletter, and these tickets provide the only entrance to the houses on exhibit. Regular members and friends of the Foundation who are interested in taking the house tour can do so by becoming sustaining members on that day. The membership chairman will be in the old Elsah Village Hall from 12 to 4 pm on October 11.

At 4 o'clock on the day of the tour there will be an open meeting for all members of the Foundation in the Village Hall. There will be reports from the President, Treasurer, and Secretary. This meeting should provide a forum in which all are encouraged to give their ideas about the future of Historic Elsah Foundation as well as their assessment of the accomplishments to date.

Please note that sustaining membership has been set at \$10 a year, which includes two tickets to the house tour. Regular members can become sustaining members by an additional payment of \$6. All memberships are for a calendar year which ends December 31, so that all renewals will be dated the first of January.